

COMMON FORMAT PROBLEMS WITH MLA CITATION

Q: How Do I Punctuate Titles?

A: It Depends Upon What Title You Refer To.

The titles of short works like sonnets, short poems, songs, chapters, and short stories are normally placed in quotation marks "like this." The titles of long works like epic poems, novels, and college textbooks or anthologies are normally either underlined or *italicized*. In the case of plays, epic poems, or novels appearing in an anthology, go ahead and underline or italicize the titles rather than treat them as "small sections" of a longer work.

Q: What Are Common Formatting Tasks Students Forget About?

A: Nearly All of Them.

Students commonly forget their page numbers. They commonly forget to include a header. They forget to double-space everything, including the Works Cited page. They forget to use hanging indentation for the Works Cited page. Sometimes they even forget the entire Works Cited page! Finally, they frequently forget to set their margins to one inch. Double-check all these.

Q: How Do I Make Sure I Include Quotations Smoothly?

A: You Integrate Your Quotation by Carefully Introducing the Material And Then Discussing Its Importance Before Moving On.

Always introduce quotations before they appear in your paper. No quotation should stand by itself as a separate sentence. Instead, your introductory phrasing should tie the quotation into the flow of your argument, and you should follow each quotation by explaining why it is important or what point it illustrates. Here are two bad examples without any introductory material.

- **Bad Example #1:** There are many examples of self-analysis in Plato's philosophy. "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato 45).
- **Bad Example #2:** Plato thinks people should analyze their own lives. "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato 45).

To integrate the quotation smoothly, we can either use a colon to link it to the previous introductory sentence, as in the acceptable example below, or we can insert a short introductory phrase, as in the better example below.

- **Acceptable Example:** Plato thinks people should analyze their own lives: "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato 45). By this statement, Plato means. . . . [In this example, the author uses a colon to show that a quote will follow the first sentence. This version is still more awkward than the version below, however.]
- **Better Example:** Plato thinks people should analyze their own lives. As he writes in one dialogue, "The unexamined life is not worth living" (Plato 45). His attitude is a common one among Greek philosophers.

Note that in the good examples, the writer doesn't suddenly start off a quotation at the beginning of the sentence, and the writer doesn't leave it hanging, unattached from the surrounding sentences. Instead, the writer attaches it to the previous introductory material with appropriate punctuation, or she adds a short

introductory phrase to set the reader up for the quote. She also follows the quote with an explanation of why that quote is important.

Q: When I'm Typing A Punctuation Mark and a Quotation Mark, Does the Punctuation Mark Appear Before or After the Quotation Mark?

A: It varies.

It goes before the quotation mark when there is no parenthetical citation of a direct quote.

When using quotation marks without using parenthetical documentation, the normal rule for MLA guidelines is to place the comma inside the final punctuation mark. So, unless you are quoting material and using a parenthetical citation, commas always go inside the quotation marks, rather than just after them. Here is an example of this situation:

Hemingway is an authorial "stud," a guy who wrote manly books.

This rule also applies to the title of short works (songs, short poems, and short stories). The punctuation goes inside the quotation mark, as you will note in the example below.

Odysseus is similar to Hemingway's hero in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," and he is similar to the character called Francis Macomber in "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber."

BUT! The Final Period Goes After the Citation with Short Parenthetical Citations:

Notice that parenthetical citations, on the other hand, require the final punctuation mark to move outside the final quotation mark. Now, the final period appears *outside* the final quotation mark and *after* the parenthetical citation, rather than being enclosed by the quotation marks. Notice where the period goes in the following examples:

As Waley observes, "Blah blah blah blah" (42).

or

One author has observed that "blah blah blah blah" (Waley 42).

One common mistake here is using two periods--one in each location. You should never, never end up with two periods at the end of a sentence. For instance, the example below is completely wrong:

No! Wrong! In Book Thirteen of The Odyssey, Homer writes, ". . . You must come from the other end of nowhere, / else you are a great booby, having to ask / what place this is." (301-303).

You should only have one period at the end of a sentence. Here is the correct version:

Yes! Perfect! In Book Thirteen of The Odyssey, Homer writes, ". . . You must come from the other end of nowhere, / else you are a great booby, having to ask / what place this is" (301-303).

Note that *no comma at all* appears after the author's name in MLA format's parenthetical citations:

No! Wrong! In Book Thirteen of The Odyssey, we read, ". . . You must come from the other end of nowhere, / else you are a great booby, having to ask / what place this is" (Homer, 301-303).

Instead of the incorrect comma, simply type a space after the author's last name in a parenthetical citation.

Yes! Perfect! In Book Thirteen of The Odyssey, we read, ". . . You must come from the other end of nowhere, / else you are a great booby, having to ask / what place this is" (Homer 301-303).

BUT! The Final Period Goes Before the Citation with an Indented Block Quotation:

If the punctuation rules weren't confusing enough, there is one more exception. When using block format for lengthy quotations, the period scoots itself over in front of the parenthetical citation. See the section on "Block Quotations" below.

Q: How Do I Indicate A Line Break in Short Quotations from Poetry or Verse Plays?

A: Slashes.

Slashes for Poetry and Verse

With poetry or plays written in verse, the student uses a slash to show where each line ends in the poem. If there are three or less lines, the material appears within the body of the paragraph like any other short quote:

- In Book Thirteen of The Odyssey, Homer writes, ". . . You must come from the other end of nowhere, / else you are a great booby, having to ask / what place this is" (301-03).

Note that in the example above, the numbers refer to lines, not page numbers. We quote articles and essays by page number, but poetry we cite by book and line number. We cite plays by act, scene, and line numbers. If it is unclear which book of the Odyssey the quotation came from, the citation above would look like this correct example:

- In one part of The Odyssey, Homer writes, ". . . You must come from the other end of nowhere, / else you are a great booby, having to ask / what place this is" (13.301-03).

In Shakespearean plays, the author may need to include the number of the act and scene as well. Here's an example quoting the play Richard III.

Richard's changes in personality become manifest in his imagery of weather. In the beginning of the play, we see this tendency in his first words: "Now is the winter of our discontent / made glorious summer by this son of York" (R3 1.1.1-2). The transformation of cold winter into warm summer mirrors his change from boredom to excitement.

Finally, note that these slashes are used only for short quotations poetry and verse plays, i.e., short works written in meter. In regular prose writing--such as in novels, short stories, or scholarly articles--no slashes should appear. No slashes are necessary when using block quotations either.

Q: How Do I Indicate A Line Break in Long Quotations?

A: Block Quotations.

The earlier tips for using slashes to indicate line breaks apply to short quotations of poetry or verse plays of three lines or less. If a student quotes four or more lines of text, then the student uses "block quotations" or "indented quotations." This means several changes are necessary.

- (1) The student removes her quotation marks. (The fact the material is specially indented indicates it is a direct quotation, so the quotation marks are redundant.)
- (2) If the student is citing poetry or verse plays, the student removes her slashes for poetic line breaks. Now the line breaks are indicated by the breaks on the actual page, because she is reproducing the text exactly as it appears on the page.
- (3) The normal placement of the final period changes. Now, the final period appears before the parenthetical citation begins.
- (4) The margin on the left-hand side of the page is scooted in an extra two tabs (an additional one inch). The margin on the right-hand side of the page remains the same.

Q: How Do I Know Which Parts of a Title to Capitalize?

The rules for capitalizing the title of one's essay are fairly specific in MLA format. First, avoid the mistake of using ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. (That's a no-no because it looks like an advertisement or a tabloid newspaper's printing.) The next rule is that you should capitalize the first letter in the following words: (1) the first and last word in the title, (2) every noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, and adverb in the title, and (3) every preposition in the title that is longer than four letters long. The only words that *won't* be capitalized are short prepositions (*of, to, by, etc.*) and short articles (*the, a, an*) that appear in the middle of the title.

Capitalization of Chapters, Books, Acts and Scenes

Be careful when capitalizing words that designate the divisions of a longer work--such as *act, scene, chapter, stanza, or canto*. In MLA guidelines, the actual titles of chapters, article titles, and subtitles are capitalized when they are part of that section's formal title. For instance, in the following sentence, the student is actually referring to the title of a specific chapter at the end of her sentence, so she capitalizes that bit and puts it in quotation marks:

Rosalind Brooke's study, Popular Religion in the Middle Ages, recommends we consider the difference between theological and mystical religious experience in "Chapter Four: What is Popular Religion?"

The words *Chapter* and *Four* are only capitalized here as part of the proper title for the chapter. If the chapter or subdivision of the longer work is untitled but numbered, different guidebooks suggest different policies for punctuation and capitalization. Some guidebooks suggest students capitalize both the name of the subdivision and the following number but place no quotation marks around it. For instance, in the following examples, the student refers specifically to one labeled section of a lengthy epic poem and one labeled section of a play:

*In Book Four of The Odyssey, Telemachus talks with a veteran of the Trojan War.
In Act One of Hamlet, the ghost frightens the soldiers at Elsinore Castle.*

However, section 3.6.5 of *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* suggests that divisions of a work referred to only by an *Arabic numeral* should not be capitalized in the body of the student's text:

*In book 4 of The Odyssey, Telemachus talks with a veteran of the Trojan War.
In act 1 of Hamlet, the ghost frightens the soldiers at Elsinore Castle.*

*In book four, Odysseus' son talks with an old veteran of the Trojan War.
In act two, scene one, Hamlet finds himself in an untenable position.*

Be consistent in your treatment of these numbers. Note that if you refer to a book using a numeric adjective, or referring to books and acts in general, you never capitalize it.

*In the opening scene of the second act of Hamlet, Hamlet finds himself in an untenable position.
In the fourth book of The Odyssey, Odysseus' son talks with a veteran of the Trojan War.
There are twelve books in The Odyssey and five acts in Hamlet.*

Writing Out Numbers:

Style manuals for different fields and companies vary in their policies for writing out numbers. That makes it hard to know when to write numbers out alphabetically as actual words (i.e., using letters, e.g., "sixteen") or numerically (i.e., using Arabic numerals, e.g., "16"). This fact will be especially tricky for any of you who are journalism students because the standards for your discipline (AP or Associated Press style) are different from the MLA rules, which are standard for English literature classes.

In AP format, numbers between one and ten are written out alphabetically ("nine" as opposed to "9"), but typically numbers of 11 or higher are written in numeric form.

In MLA format, any number that can be written in two words is written out alphabetically, for instance, "twenty-one." Any number that cannot be written in two words should be typed in numeric form, for instance, "731" or "3.14159."

There are some important exceptions:

- (1) Always use numerical form for addresses, statistics, percentages or decimals, page numbers, and the numbers in addresses.
- (2) Always use alphabetical form for numbers beginning sentences. (Avoid using a statistical number as the first word of a sentence if you can help it.)

For more information, see [Writing at Carson-Newman](#) pages 66-85, [The Bedford Handbook](#), pages 448-451, or [The MLA Handbook](#) 6th edition, pages 98-102.

Q: What is the Most Common Grammatical Problem?

Pronouns: Agreement in Gender/Number

Writers often stumble when they come to pronouns and the antecedent of a pronoun. Sometimes when students try to avoid sexist language, they mistakenly resort to using plural pronouns such as *they* or *their* in reference to a singular subject. At other times, by sheer force of non-grammatical, everyday speech, writers slip into the use of plural pronouns with singular antecedents. Always be aware of how many people are in a sentence, and whether the antecedent to which a word refers is single or plural.

If you want to avoid sexist language, do not resort to awkward phrases like *his/her* or *him/her*. Likewise, do not resort to using *they* or *their* to refer to a singular subject. Instead, make the subject of your sentence plural and then use *their* or *them*. That way, a writer simultaneously avoids sexist language, improper grammar, and awkward phrasing.

- **Incorrect:** In the play, each character must keep their thoughts to themselves.
- **Okay but awkward:** In the play, each character must keep his/her thoughts to himself/herself.
- **Yes!** In the play, all characters must keep their thoughts to themselves.

Remember also that the words ending in *-body* and *-one* (*somebody*, *everyone*, *everybody*, etc.) are considered to be singular rather than plural. (For instance, we say, "Everybody is coming to town," not "Everybody are coming to town.") Since these pronouns are singular, normally they require a singular pronoun. "Everybody brought his book with him" is a traditional construction. On the other hand, "Everybody brought their book with them" is not considered correct in traditional grammar. To avoid sexist speech, the best suggestion is to pick a plural subject with which to begin the sentence. ("All of the students brought their books with them.") *All* is considered plural, while the words *someone*, *everyone*, and so on are considered singular.